

## **Playing with Children's Minds: The Psychological Effects of Tobacco Advertisements on Children**

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### **Abstract**

*This research explored the relationship between children being exposed to tobacco advertisements and the psychological effects of these exposures. The focus of this research was on the applications of behavioral learning theories (such as classical and operant conditioning) to tobacco ads, psychological tactics used by tobacco advertisers to induce children to purchase their products, and the effectiveness of the psychological tactics in getting children to purchase tobacco products. It was found that repeated exposure to tobacco ads and smoking shown in movies and other media, causes children to see smoking as being something social and fun that many people do. Also, sponsoring of sports events causes smoking to appear to promote athleticism. Evidence found by numerous studies showed that comprehensive tobacco bans reduce smoking rates. It also showed that increases in tobacco advertising causes significant increases in youth smoking. It was concluded that tobacco ads do use psychological tactics that convince children to believe that smoking is good. The positive attitude that children develop towards smoking causes them to smoke. Then their addiction keeps them smoking.*

### **Introduction**

A cigarette is one of the only consumer products which, if consumed, kills. Tobacco kills 4 million people today, over 70% of them in the developing world. The tobacco industry's products will kill 10 million people by the first quarter of the next century; many of them will be in the prime of their lives (Cordry, 2001).

Wade Hampton, a fifty-one year old former smoker, began to smoke at the age of fourteen or fifteen years old. By eighteen years old Hampton was hooked on cigarettes. In 1994, he was diagnosed with throat cancer and cancer of the larynx. Today he has a removed voice box and a permanent opening in his throat (Heyes, 1999). Wade wishes that he never made that decision to start smoking.

This decision to smoke is enhanced by advertising. The addictiveness of tobacco and its sales and promotion tactics severely handicap people's freedom to make informed decisions about choosing to smoke. The tobacco industry has a history of using deceptive practices in advertisements. Beginning in the 1920's, before there was actual proof (only suspicions) that smoking caused lung cancer; smokers began to notice that smoking made their throats irritated, causing them to cough. Cigarette makers responded to this concern by using celebrities and even doctors in their advertisements to make false claims that their cigarettes would not irritate their user's throats (Cordry, 2001).

Today, there are laws against making false accusations about tobacco products in advertisements. So, now the tobacco industry uses more subtle approaches to sell their products. These approaches involved advertisers studying how people think. This is when they began to focus more on psychological tactics to influence new smokers (Kilbourne, 2000).

Wade Hampton's (as mentioned above) choice to try cigarettes at such a young age is a decision that many others have made before they may fully understand what they are getting themselves into. Many young people start smoking around the same age that he did (and even younger) and are hooked on cigarettes by the time that they are just old enough to smoke legally. Many critics of tobacco advertisers feel that these children begin to smoke because advertisers exploit their lack of experience and knowledge. They claim that advertising induces the demand for tobacco use amongst young people and that the tobacco industry purposely targets children as their most promising market.

All of this points to a need to carefully analyze tobacco advertising and its psychological effects on children. To analyze this issue, this paper will first consider and investigate the following questions:

1. How do tobacco advertisers apply behavioral learning principles in ads?
2. What psychological tactics do tobacco advertisers use to get children to buy their products?
3. Are the psychological tactics used in tobacco ads effective in getting children to purchase their products?

### **How do Tobacco Advertisers Apply Behavioral Learning Principles in Ads?**

Behavioral learning principles apply to many marketing situations. George Perlov, a member of advertising council, stated, “Advertising is an art and a science” (Committee on Communications, 1995). It may be used to create a distinctive brand image or it may link a product to an underlying need. To better understand how tobacco advertisers create ads using psychology to change children’s buying behavior, this paper will briefly discuss two behavioral learning theories in the following section.

One behavioral learning theory used by tobacco advertisers is classical conditioning. As demonstrated by Pavlov, classical conditioning occurs when a stimulus that brings forth a response is paired with another stimulus that originally wouldn’t cause that response. Over time, the stimulus that wouldn’t bring forth a response will bring forth the same response as the first stimulus. It is now associated with the first stimulus (Bower, 1989). Many classic advertising campaigns consist of product slogans that have been repeated so many times that they are fixed in consumer’s minds. An example of a tobacco ad that was aimed at boys and used classical conditioning is the Marlboro Man. The Marlboro Man is just a character, but he is associated with being “ruff and rugged” (Liu, 2000). Another example is cigarette ads that show young people having a good time at a party and smoking. A child viewing this ad may begin to associate that happy feeling with the cigarette.

Another behavioral learning theory is called operant conditioning. Operant conditioning, as demonstrated by Skinner, occurs when an individual learns to perform behaviors that produce positive outcomes and avoid those that produce negative outcomes (Bower, 1989). Operant conditioning is being used when a consumer is rewarded for a purchase decision. Tobacco advertisers use operant conditioning when they reward customers with prizes for using their product. An example of this appears to be Camel cigarettes and their use of “Camel Cash.” This promotion promises kids that if they buy Camel cigarettes they will be rewarded with free sunglasses or flip-flops and other promotional items (Hammer, 2001).

Tobacco advertisers use these theories when they are creating advertisements that are targeted towards children. Children are so important to the tobacco industry that they have done research on children using hidden cameras, interviews, and psychological tests to find ways to get children to smoke.

### **What Psychological Tactics do Tobacco Advertisers Use to Get Children to Buy their Products?**

Tobacco advertisers want to maximize their profits by gaining life-long customers. So they target children in their advertisements to get them hooked on cigarettes as early as possible in hopes that they will be loyal customers for the remainder of their lives. Tobacco advertising has had many proven psychological effects on children, but this section will first uncover the many psychological tactics used by these advertisers to get children to buy their products.

Tobacco advertisers use different identity tactics to influence young people by showing them that smoking is “cool.” Camel cigarettes did this with the use of a cartoon character in the 1990’s that they called Joe Camel (West, 2002). The Children Now Organization (CNO) (1998) states that a study found that twice as many children than adults associated Joe Camel with Camel cigarettes and that these ads were attractive.

Sponsorship, another identity tactic, according to the Physicians for a Smoke-Free Canada Organization (PSFC) (2001) creates an association between an exiting, fun event with the sponsoring company. In this way sponsorship can be a powerful way of getting children to identify with tobacco products, especially since most of these sponsored events use celebrities that children identify with. Some celebrity events outright influence children to buy cigarettes. In Taiwan, RJR Salem agents arranged a concert by teen idol Hsow-Yu Chang. The only accepted admission to this event was five empty packs of Salem’s cigarettes, and ten empty packs to receive a sweatshirt (Hammer, 2001). Sponsorship has also been a way for tobacco advertisers to advertise their products and remain within the boundaries set by tobacco advertisement bans. RJR Salem had sponsored a live concert by Paula Abdul in Seoul, and a televised concert by Madonna in Hong-Kong, two places where television ads for tobacco are supposed to be banned (Hammer, 2001).

Another tactic that tobacco advertisers use is connecting cigarettes to independence and resisting authority. It is associated with growing-up, taking risks, and being cool, things that children crave as they grow-up (Hammer, 2001). Kilbourne (2000) concurs by pointing out that tobacco advertising promotes attitudes and values as well as products. She further discusses that an example of this promotion of certain values is when Kent cigarette ads used the slogan “the experience you seek”. This advertisement instills in children a value of being

experienced by trying Kent cigarettes. This technique is helpful when attempting to change children's attitudes towards cigarettes because they may begin to value Kent cigarettes as a necessary growth experience.

Social learning theory suggests that "repeated exposure to modeled behavior can result in behavioral changes in lifestyle" (Kilbourne, 2000). Tobacco advertisers are aware of this, and they use this technique by showing cigarette smoking in different media so as to make smoking appear to be a normal social event. CNO (1998) shows this by discussing that half of the top grossing films released between 1990 and 1995, as found by a University of California study, contained scenes in which someone smoked; a rise of 29% from the 1970's. The Committee on Communications (1995) adds that this repeated exposure technique has even been used in almost all PG-13 rated movies and even in G-rated movies such as Pinocchio and the Little Mermaid.

Tobacco advertisers also use gender stereotypes in ads that target children. Children, who learn early in their lives about what society expects a man or a woman to be, want to live up to these societal expectations. Tobacco advertisers use this vulnerability in creating ads that use these societal pressures. Hoek and Sheppard (1990) analyze this in their study by stating that boy-oriented ads tend to have more aggressive behaviors and higher activity levels, whereas girl-oriented ads tend to have less activity and low levels of aggression. In addition, the girl-oriented ads focus on themes of popularity and beauty. Kilbourne (2001) elaborates on this idea by analyzing that tobacco advertisements aimed at girls promote tobacco use as a form of weight control. She uses the examples of a Virginia Slim ad which shows very thin models and reads, "more than just a sleek shape," and the Capri cigarette ad that reads, "the slimmest slim in town." Kilbourne goes on to say that tobacco ads aimed at boys show young guys being adventurous and acting very "macho." These adventure themes appear to be used by Marlboro in ads that they aim at boys. Marlboro uses an adventure team consisting of rock climbers, bike racers, and car racers who sport Marlboro gear and appear to be users of the cigarette brand (Hammer, 2001).

These psychological techniques used by tobacco advertiser's play on children's mental and emotional development. They understand and use behavioral and learning theories to persuade children to try their highly addictive product. Tobacco advertisers also use cultural pressures to sell their product by creating an image of a product that will fulfill some of children's social needs. People who criticize the tobacco industry do so because they claim that the image created of the product does not match the true product.

### **Are the Psychological Tactics Used in Tobacco Ads Effective in Getting Children to Purchase Tobacco Products?**

The principle goal of advertising to children is to sell products to children (Committee on Communications, 1995). In the case of the tobacco industry, children are their most important clients. This paper will now demonstrate why children are so important to tobacco advertisers, and then it will briefly talk about the first step of nicotine addiction. Lastly, it will show that psychological tactics in ads are effective in getting children to buy tobacco products.

There are five stages of nicotine addiction. The first stage, called the preparatory stage, is when a child will learn about tobacco use and form true-or-false beliefs about it (Moe, 2000). If positive beliefs are developed at that stage, children go on to try and experiment with tobacco. Then they go on to becoming regular smokers and eventually will become addicted (Moe, 2000). Therefore, the most crucial stage for tobacco advertisers is the preparatory stage. It is during this stage that tobacco ads need to help kids develop positive beliefs on using tobacco if they want to be profitable (CNO, 1998).

Young smokers are a huge money-maker for the tobacco industry. More than 5,000 young people start smoking everyday (Hammer, 2001). The Novartis Foundation of Gerontology (NFG, 2003) emphasizes that 28.5% of high school students, and 20% of middle school students are smokers. The School Health Foundation (SHF, 2003) adds that 4% of sixth grade students also use tobacco. Collectively, they all smoke more than 500 million packs of cigarettes per year (Liu, 2000).

It is very important for tobacco advertisers to get their product to appeal to children enough for them to try it. All tobacco advertisers are aware of their small window of opportunity in recruiting new smokers. If kids don't start smoking while they're young, they most likely never will (Liu, 2000). Hammer (2001) notes that 90% of adult smokers began to smoke before turning 18 years of age.

When these children become adults, they continue with their same routine smoking habits. This is because many children have a tendency to overestimate the amount of people who smoke, and underestimate the addictive nature of the nicotine drug found in tobacco (Moe, 2000). They think that smoking is something normal and that everybody is doing it. They also think that "they can quit whenever they want to." But 70% of them are still smoking at the age of 25 (SHF, 2003). According to one report, children who have smoked 100 cigarettes or more are generally not able to quit even if they want to (SHF, 2003). Moe (2000) warns that it only takes a little more than three

times of experimenting with cigarettes to possibly turn into a regular smoker. These findings explain why tobacco advertisers give away entire packs of cigarettes at clubs and concerts. They know that it only takes a few cigarettes to get these children “hooked” for life.

Boys and girls have different reasons for why they smoke, and there are differences in the amount of smokers belonging to each gender. 48.2% of student smoker’s are male, and 36% are female. Girls begin to smoke a little bit later than guys do (SHF, 2003). Moe (2000) summarizes reasons why each gender smokes. These findings prove that the gender stereotypes in tobacco advertisements (discussed above) have been successful in creating associations between cigarettes and these popular themes. Moe (2000) claims that girls in grades 7-10, as found by a University of Minnesota study, smoke because they are worried about their weight. They even have a harder time giving up tobacco than boys do because they fear that they will gain weight if they do. In addition, smoking made the girls feel older and more mature. Moe (2000) further states that boys did not smoke because of weight concerns. They smoked because they enjoyed being “rebellious” and they felt that it made them look “cool” and more “manly.”

Young people with a lot of exposure to cigarette ads are far more likely to become smokers than those with less exposure to these ads (Liu, 2002). Guy Smith, a Philip Morris tobacco executive, claims that their research shows that advertising is the top reason young people start smoking (Bailey, 1996). This may be difficult for most of us to believe because most people don’t like to admit that advertising influences them. Despite these claims, a study done by Richard Pollay found that when a company’s advertising budget increased, its market share increased only 3% for adults, but over 9% for children (Bailey, 1996). In addition, the most heavily advertised brands were purchased the most.

It has also been found that tobacco control reduces smoking rates. This trend has been noticed in many countries. The World Health Organization (WHO, 2002), for example, found that from the 1990’s until now, Thailand’s smoking rates were cut from 60% to 40% due to tobacco control. WHO (2002) further discusses that a review of bans in 100 countries showed that comprehensive bans (complete advertising and sponsorship bans) cut cigarette consumption by 8% per capita. Cordry (2001) concurs by emphasizing that comprehensive bans are powerful, but partial bans have little effect since tobacco companies often find ways to bypass them by using many indirect tactics.

After conducting this investigation, I have concluded that the major psychological effect of tobacco advertising is that it causes a change in children’s belief systems. It causes them to form positive

attitudes towards smoking cigarettes. Then, once they feel that smoking is “cool” and will help them to become associated with the “in” crowd, they try a cigarette or two. They are not capable of understanding how addicting nicotine truly is. The tobacco industry manipulates young people by convincing them that smoking is fun, and it can be sexy, romantic and glamorous. Smoking is constantly shown this way in advertisements and movies. In sponsored sports events, smokers are also portrayed as being athletic. Children psychologically make these connections with tobacco products because of what they constantly see in tobacco ads. These connections that they make are false because smoking actually hinders athletic ability, and it isn’t all that glamorous if you end up with a deadly disease or have a hole cut in your throat, as Wade Hamilton did.

Evidence that I found supported the notion that decreases in tobacco consumption are associated with tobacco promotion bans. In addition, I found that when advertising increases, tobacco consumption increases. These findings have led me to believe that there is a definite causal relationship between tobacco ads and increases in smoking amongst children. Cumulative evidence that I gathered from answering these research questions strongly supports the conclusion that marketing plays a significant role in youth smoking behavior in terms of initial experimentation and brand preference.

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